



ECDC Weekly Policy Brief – 4 February 2021

Not for publication

COVID-19 in EU/EEA

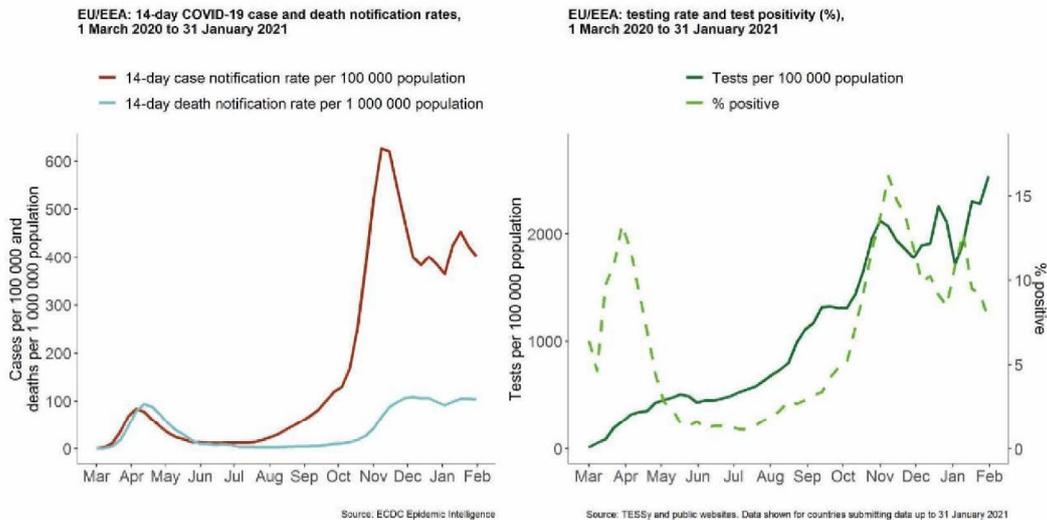
Reporting period: 25 - 31 January 2021

Epidemiological summary

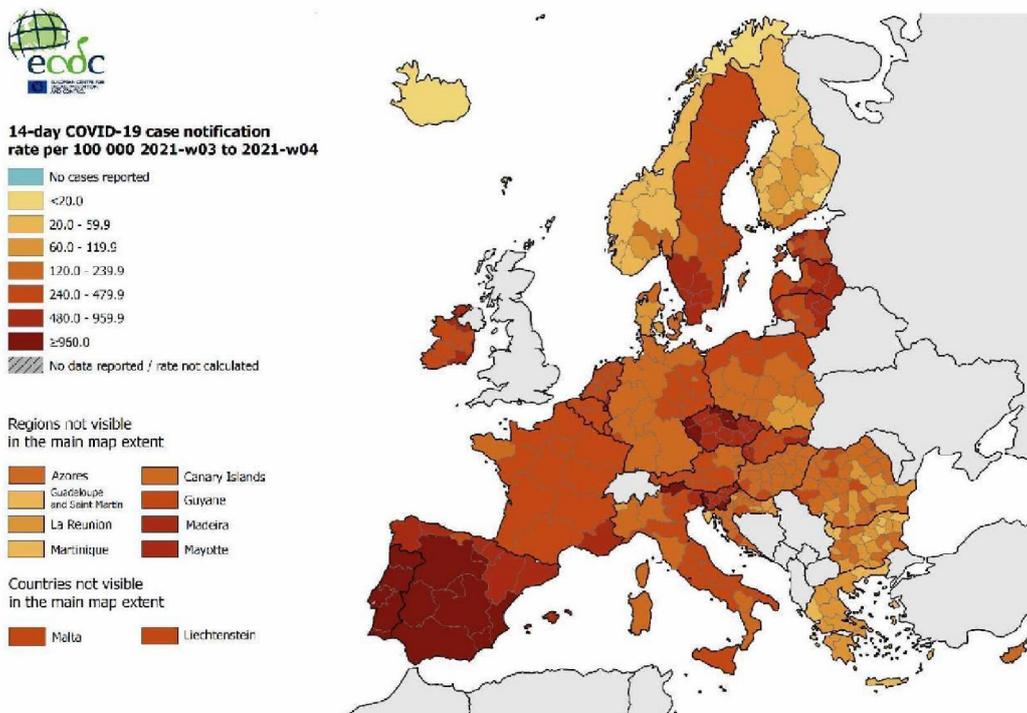
- During the reporting week, the **epidemiological situation was of serious concern in all EU/EEA countries except Iceland and Norway (stable)**, with high or increasing case notification rates among older age groups and/or high or increasing death rates across all population. Rates of hospital and ICU admissions, as well as the number of patients per capita in hospital and ICU due to COVID-19, remain very high, although recent stable or decreasing trends for these indicators continue to be observed in several countries.
- Among the 28 countries with an epidemiological situation of serious concern, **increasing trends of cases were reported in seven countries (Belgium, Finland, France, Greece, Luxembourg, Portugal and Spain)**, compared to four countries in the previous report. **Stable or decreasing trends** of reported cases were observed in **21 countries**, compared to 25 countries in the last report.
- **Increasing case rates among older age groups or increasing death rates were reported in six countries** (Greece, Ireland, Malta, Portugal, Slovakia and Spain) during the reporting week. **Four countries** (Malta, Portugal, Romania, and Spain) observed **increases in hospital or ICU admissions and/or occupancy** due to COVID-19.
- Absolute values of these **indicators remain high**, even where they are stable or decreasing, suggesting that transmission remains widespread.
- **There is no indication that public health and physical distancing measures can be relaxed, even in countries with decreasing trends.**

Key COVID-19 trends in Europe

1 March to 31 January: 14-day COVID-19 case and death notification rates, testing rate and test positivity trends



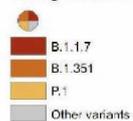
31 January: current 14-day COVID-19 case notification rate per 100 000 population



NEW! Detection of SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern, in all sequenced samples in EU/EEA, 14 December 2020 to 17 January 2021, as reported to GISAID EpiCoV 2 February



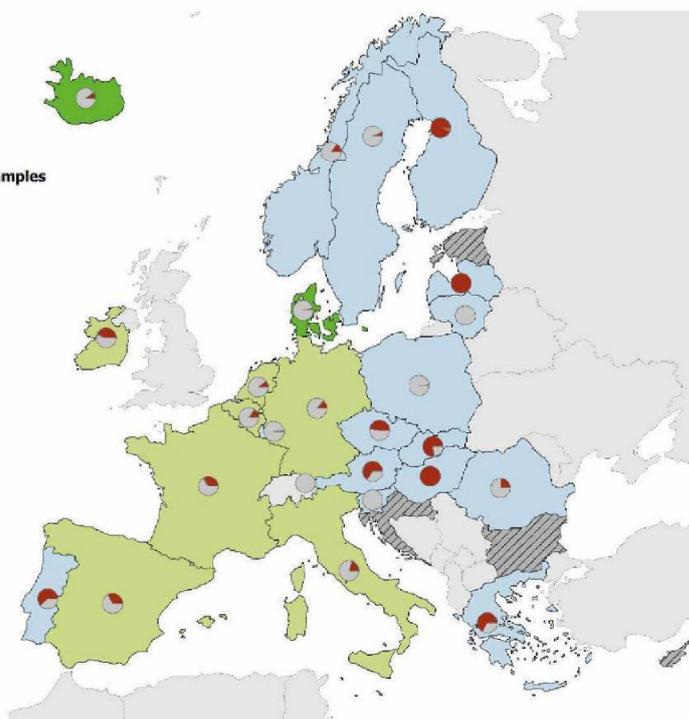
Distribution of variants among sequenced samples during week 2020-51 to 2021-02



Weekly average of samples collected with a published sequence during week 2020-51 to 2021-02



Countries not visible in the main map extent



Source: GISAID EpiCoV data¹; Administrative boundaries: © EuroGeographics
 The boundaries and names shown on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the European Union. ECDC. Map produced on: 2 Feb 2021

Epidemiological overview

- By 31 January 2021, the 14-day case notification rate for the EU/EEA was **402** (country range: 11–1 652) per 100 000 population, compared to 421 in the last report. The rate has been **decreasing for two weeks**. Seven countries (Czechia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Portugal, Slovenia and Spain) had notification rates higher than 500 per 100 000 population during the week of reporting, compared to nine in the previous report.
- The 14-day COVID-19 death notification rate for the EU/EEA was **103.9** (country range: 0.0–362.9) per million population and remained stable compared to **103.2** in the previous report. Death notification rates above 50 per 1 000 000 population were reported by 23 countries, the same as in last week's report. Of these, 11 countries (Czechia, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia and Spain) had rates above 100 per 1 000 000 population.
- Testing rates in the EU/EEA as a whole continue to increase since the start of the year. Weekly testing rates for the reporting week were available for 29 countries and varied from 742 to 13 409 tests per 100 000 population. Denmark had the highest testing rate for this week, followed by Cyprus, Luxembourg, Austria and Slovenia.
- Among 21 countries in which weekly test positivity was high (at least 3%), three countries (France, Portugal and Slovakia) observed an increase in test positivity compared with the previous week. Test positivity remained stable or had decreased in 18 countries (Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden).
- Pooled ICU occupancy data from 19 countries show that there were 1.6 patients per 100 000 population in ICU due to COVID-19, the same as in the previous report.
- Pooled weekly ICU admissions based on data from 13 countries were 2.5 new admissions per 100 000 population, compared to 3.6 in the previous report.
- During the reporting week, all countries except Iceland and Norway had an epidemiological situation of serious concern. Among these countries, **stable or decreasing trends in reported cases were observed in 21 countries, compared to 25 in the last report. Increases were present in seven countries (Belgium, Finland, France, Greece, Luxembourg, Portugal and Spain).**
- **Sequencing capacity** varies greatly across the EU/EEA; the rate of SARS-CoV-2-positive cases sequenced and reported to GISAID EpiCoV by 2 February for the period of 14 December 2020 to 17 January 2021 was lower than the recommended level of 10% in all but two EU/EEA countries (Denmark and Iceland). Seven countries sequenced and reported between 60 and 499 samples to GISAID EpiCoV during the same time period while 21 countries sequenced and reported <60 samples or did not report data.
- In countries that sequenced and reported $\geq 10\%$ or at least 500 samples from 14 December 2020 to 17 January 2021 to GISAID EpiCoV (Denmark and Iceland), the proportion of cases with the B.1.1.7 variant was 3.3% and 9.5%, respectively, while the proportion of those with the B.1.351 and P.1 variants was <0.01%.
- Transmission remains high in most countries, despite decreasing trends in some indicators. The epidemiological situation appears to be improving in the majority of countries, while a few other countries continue to see increasing numbers of cases, hospitalisations, ICU admissions and deaths. This serves as a reminder of the importance of **maintaining public health and physical distancing measures and that these measures should not be relaxed, even in countries with decreasing trends.**

A full table with all indicators and the assessment for each country is available in the annex.

The new ECDC map on detection of variants of concern in sequenced samples is included above under key trends.

Hot topics

Recommendations regarding age groups for the AstraZeneca vaccine

Following the conditional marketing authorisation on 29 January for the Oxford University/AstraZeneca (AZ) vaccine in the EU/EEA, Member States have adopted various public health recommendations for use of this vaccine in people aged 55 and above, due to limited information so far on vaccine efficacy in these age groups. Of note, however, immunogenicity studies included in the EMA assessment suggest that older individuals respond well to this vaccine and that it seems to protect against severe disease and hospitalisation.

Specifically, a few EU countries currently limit their recommendations to younger age groups, for example Finland (18-70 years), Germany (18-64 years), Sweden (18-65), France (18-65 years), Italy and Belgium (18-55). The UK uses this vaccine since early January, with no recommendation on upper age limit.

This highlights important considerations on vaccine recommendations and deployment:

- Public health authorities assess other factors in addition to those considered by regulatory agencies, such as epidemiological situation, priority target groups, quantity of other approved vaccines in their portfolio, logistics and price.
- Interim recommendations may change when more data on effectiveness in older age groups becomes available in about 5-7 weeks.
- The availability of several vaccines and their use across different population groups may lead to communication challenges with the public preferring another vaccine than what is offered to them.

Trial results on the Sputnik V vaccine available – what's next?

On 2 February, a publication in The Lancet reports on the phase 3 trial results for the Gam-COVID-Vac (Sputnik V) vaccine developed by the Gamaleya research centre in Russia, with the interim analysis showing 91.6% efficacy and a conclusion that the vaccine was well tolerated. These efficacy results are very similar to the two EU- authorised mRNA COVID-19 vaccines developed by BioNTech and Moderna, and better than the COVID-19 Vaccine AstraZeneca.

Among the EU/EEA countries, Hungary has granted a six-month emergency approval to this vaccine. According to media reports, Gamaleya centre intends to apply for market authorisation in the EU, and Germany is "open to the idea" of using its European manufacturing capacities to increase the production of Russia's Sputnik V vaccine, however, this would only happen if the EMA gives its approval to the Sputnik V vaccine.

In focus

Update to the maps in support of the Council Recommendation

On 28 January 2021, the Council amended the Recommendation on a coordinated approach to the restriction of free movement in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which included a visual change to the maps using four colour categories instead of three, and which is implemented from 4 February 2021. There is no change to how the data are collected or how the indicators are calculated.

Weekly maps on distribution of SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern in the EU/EEA

On 4 February 2021, ECDC produces the first map of the distribution of SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern and the weekly average of samples collected with a published sequence in the EU/EEA. This map will be updated and published on a weekly basis jointly with the weekly surveillance reports.

Report on stress-testing logistical aspects of COVID-19 vaccination deployment plans

On 3 February, ECDC published a report with results of stress tests done with 12 EU/EEA countries in order to assess the logistical aspects of COVID-19 vaccination deployment plans. Topics assessed in this one-day simulation exercise conducted remotely included: processes to receive, store and allocate vaccines to vaccination sites, vaccination delivery strategy and risk communication plans.

A similar stress test exercise was performed with Western Balkan countries on 1 February 2021.

Assessing and ramping up laboratory capacity to detect SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern

On 9 February 2021, ECDC plans to publish a technical report on the current detection and characterisation capability and capacity for SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern across the EU/EEA. It is based on a survey conducted in January, with 29 EU/EEA Member States responding.

Currently, all but three EU/EEA countries (Cyprus, Lithuania and Poland) indicated that they actively investigating the emergence of SARS-CoV-2 variants. However, the current proportion of positive SARS-CoV-2 specimens characterized by sequencing is still below the recommended 5% in all but three countries (Denmark, Iceland and Luxembourg). In total, six countries indicated a need for sequencing support and eight countries require bioinformatics support.

To respond to the urgent need for increased capacity to detect and monitor variants of concern across the EU/EEA, ECDC and the Commission are currently investigating different solutions for the short and long term support for strengthening this capacity. According to the current plan, increased sequencing services can be offered to Member States starting in early to mid-February. Countries with limited capacity or having an urgent need to strengthen surveillance due to their epidemiological situation will be asked to send samples in the first round. Countries selected for this first round of support are Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia and Portugal.

Updates on non-pharmaceutical interventions in Member States

ECDC collects information on non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) implemented in EU/EEA countries in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The database is updated every second week.

As of 26 January 2021, the following mobility restrictions are recorded and active:

- Seven nationally enforced "stay-at-home" orders (legally enforced) in Austria, Cyprus, Czechia, Greece, Ireland, Lithuania and Portugal. Regional enforced "stay-at-home" orders in Italy.
- Two national "stay-at-home" recommendations (not legally enforced) are currently active in Norway and the Netherlands.
- Curfews ("partial" stay-at-home orders) are currently active in Belgium, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Spain.

As of 26 January 2021, the following closures of educational institutions have been recorded and remain active according to our database:

- At the national level, day-cares and nurseries are closed in Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands and Portugal. Primary schools are closed (at least partially) in Austria, Cyprus, Czechia, Germany, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia.
- Secondary schools are closed, at the national level, in Austria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czechia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Sweden. Higher education institutions remain closed in Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czechia, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia.

Workplaces have been strongly urged, or forced to transition, to teleworking at the national level in Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden.

Visualisations of all active NPIs from 1 September 2020 for each EU/EEA country: [Weekly COVID-19 Country Overview](#)

Recent and upcoming ECDC publications on COVID-19

- 1st update, Sequencing of SARS-CoV-2 technical guidance, 18 January
- ECDC rapid assessment of laboratory capacities related to COVID-19 (laboratory survey report), 18 January
- Rapid Risk Assessment - Risk related to spread of new SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern in the EU/EEA – first update, 21 January
- Update, EU/EEA deployment and vaccination plans for COVID-19 vaccines, 1 February
- Integrated COVID-19 response in the vaccination era, 1 February
- Stress-test on logistical aspects of COVID-19 vaccination deployment plans, 3 February
- Detection and characterisation capability and capacity for SARS-CoV-2 variants (laboratory survey report), 9 February
- Launch of weekly overview reports on COVID-19 vaccines roll-out, 9 February
- COVID-19 and supply of substances of human origin in the EU/EEA – third update, 9 February
- Behavioural Insights research to support the response to COVID-19: a survey of implementation in the EU/EEA, 15 February
- 1st update, Guidelines for COVID-19 Testing and quarantine, of air travellers, Addendum to the Aviation Health Safety Protocol, February

In addition to the above publications, a number of other outputs are of note:

- Launch of Vaccine Tracker on vaccines roll-out in the EU/EEA, 1 February
- Four-colour maps in support of the Council Recommendation on a coordinated approach to the restriction of free movement in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in the EU/EEA, 3 February
- Launch of weekly map on distribution of SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern and weekly average of samples collected with a published sequence, EU/EEA, 4 February

Publication dates for all upcoming ECDC reports are preliminary and subject to change.

Annex:

Criteria for epidemiological assessment

Epidemiological situation is 'concerning'

Countries with at least two of the following:

1. High ($\geq 60/100\ 000$) or sustained increase¹ (≥ 1 week) in 14-day case notification rates
2. High ($\geq 3\%$) or sustained increase (≥ 1 week) in test positivity
3. High ($\geq 60/100\ 000$) or sustained increase (≥ 1 week) in 14-day case notification rates in the older age groups (65+yr)
4. High ($\geq 10/1\ 000\ 000$) or sustained increase (≥ 1 week) in 14-day death notification rates

Epidemiological situation is 'of serious concern'

Countries whose epidemiological situation is 'concerning' and which meet at least one of criteria 3-4.

Epidemiological situation 'stable'

Countries not meeting the criteria described above for 'concerning'

Additionally, data on ICU and hospital admissions or occupancy due to COVID-19 are considered but not formally used as part of the assessment. The following provisional thresholds have been used in the table below, but these are subject to change as they are undergoing internal review within ECDC:

- *High ($\geq 25\%$ of the peak value during the pandemic) or sustained increase (≥ 1 week) in the rate of weekly hospital admissions due to COVID-19; and/or the 7-day mean hospital occupancy due to COVID-19*
- *High ($\geq 25\%$ of the peak value during the pandemic) or sustained increase (≥ 1 week) in the rate of weekly ICU admissions due to COVID-19; and/or the 7-day mean ICU occupancy due to COVID-19*

¹ Definitions of increases for each indicator can be found in <https://covid19-country-overviews.ecdc.europa.eu/>

Key indicators and weekly trends per country as of 31 January 2021, EU/EEA

Indicators shown: 14-day COVID-19 case notification rate per 100 000 population, 14-day COVID-19 death rate per 1 000 000 population, test positivity, testing rate per 100 000 population, age-specific case notification rate per 100 000 population for the age groups 65 years or older, weekly hospital and ICU admissions due to COVID-19 per 100 000 population, 7-day mean hospital and ICU occupancy due to COVID-19.

Notes: The Sparkline shows the evolution of the epidemic in each country in terms of the indicators shown since the beginning of March 2020. The colour of the entire Sparkline denotes the current trend in the indicator, based on a comparison of its most recent value with that seven days earlier.

- Red – sustained increasing trend;
- Grey – stable or decreasing trend;

Values in the column next to the Sparkline are the current value for the indicator. If no data are available for the current week then the value is left blank. Values that are considered high for the indicator, according to the criteria listed above, are shown in red.

Country	Assessment	Case rate		Death rate		Positivity (%)		Testing rate		65+yr	Hospital admissions		Hospital occupancy		ICU admissions		ICU occupancy		
		Value	Trends	Value	Trends	Value	Trends	Value	Trends		Value	Trends	Value	Trends	Value	Trends	Value	Trends	
Austria	Of serious concern	224.3		72.1		1.4		7,402		218				16.7				3.4	
Belgium	Of serious concern	276.4		58		4.8		3,012		251.8		7		16.1				2.8	
Bulgaria	Of serious concern	99.1		80.3		5.3		1,059						40.8				3.9	
Croatia	Of serious concern	181.3		97.9		8.7		981		440.8		15.3		34					
Cyprus	Of serious concern	217.8		33.1		0.8		11,775		146		7.1		17.2				4	
Czechia	Of serious concern	896.5		182.4		13.8		3,231		779		99.2		55.4		16.5		9.3	
Denmark	Of serious concern	156.1		58.6		0.5		13,409		118		6.6		10.7				1.9	
Estonia	Of serious concern	518.1		64.9		10.4		2,532		544.6		22.5		30.9		2		3	
Finland	Of serious concern	93.2		10.1		2.7		1,917		25.9				2.5				0.4	
France	Of serious concern	427		86.2		6.8		3,167				16		40.6		2.7		4.6	
Germany	Of serious concern	218.4		126.3		7.5		1,289		238.5		2.4						5.4	
Greece	Of serious concern	77.9		30.5		2.4		1,956		62.5						0.6			
Hungary	Of serious concern	163.8		119.6		7.6		1,116		200.7				37.9					
Ireland	Of serious concern	485.7		142.5		6.6		2,795		551.8		12.5		34		1.4		4.4	
Italy	Of serious concern	284.6		105		5		2,871		212		5.3		38.2				3.8	
Latvia	Of serious concern	550.9		113		7.9		3,462		521.9		36.9		55.5		8.5			
Liechtenstein	Of serious concern	265.8		52.1															
Lithuania	Of serious concern	533.3		127.4		9.7		2,107		440.1		16.4		35.1		3.4			
Luxembourg	Of serious concern	296		45.6		1.9		8,364		146				11.1				2.1	
Malta	Of serious concern	465.2		68.9		5.2		4,583		295.1		5.3							
Netherlands	Of serious concern	371.8		56		10.9		1,520		351.3		7		9.4		1.4		3.8	
Poland	Of serious concern	196.1		99.4		12.5		742		188.4		0.2		36.8					
Portugal	Of serious concern	1652.5		362.9		22		3,995		1446.5		6.1		63.8				7.8	
Romania	Of serious concern	173		54.8		9.1		917		226.1		43.0						5.2	
Slovakia	Of serious concern	468.4		204.8		19		1,245						60.2					
Slovenia	Of serious concern	818.8		183.1		8.4		4,746		693.9		27.8		53.3		4.1		8.4	
Spain	Of serious concern	1036.2		113.2		13.2		3,715		659		5.9		61.3		0.3		8.7	
Sweden	Of serious concern	429.5		47.8		10.7		1,888		245.0				19.1		0.9		2.6	
Iceland	Stable	10.9		0		0.2		2,355		0		0.3		4.8					
Norway	Stable	81		8.6		1.2		2,878		26.1		0.8		2		0.2			